

Different Currents in the Nicaraguan Insurrection

And a Look Inside an Occupied University in Managua

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As even the Russian state news service admits, the ongoing revolt in Nicaragua against Daniel Ortega's government is coming largely from the left side of the political spectrum. While supporters of the authoritarian left exhort people to support "left" governments no matter what neoliberal policies they implement or how many people they slaughter, we believe that the declining fortunes of left governments throughout Latin America are not just the consequences of CIA conspiracies but also the consequence of real shortcomings of the institutional left and of government itself. Doubtless, various capitalists and state actors have their own agendas for Nicaragua and they hope to take advantage of the uprising to implement them. But ordinary people have legitimate reasons to rise up. We should identify the participants in the uprising who are pursuing goals complementary to our vision of a world without capitalism and the state, in order to direct our solidarity towards them. Otherwise, as the Ortega government attempts to retain power by brute force, the revolt will likely be hijacked by right-wing and colonial interests.

While students were discussing what demands to make in the negotiations with Ortega, *Dis-sensus Nicaragua* published a translation of the *CrimethInc.* text "Why We Don't Make Demands" in Spanish. The negotiations have broken down. Now the crisis is intensifying, with students continuing to occupy universities while the police continue killing people and Ortega refuses to back down. In the following report, our Nicaraguan correspondent outlines some of the tensions within the uprising and presents an eyewitness report from inside one of these occupied universities.

Different Forces in the Revolt

I am part of the affinity group that created sosnicaraguareporte.com, in Spanish. It includes a timeline and all sorts of information. It's a good place for news. There is even a meme section!

As of this writing, over 100 people have been murdered by the state and the police in the uprising in Nicaragua. The majority have been students. On Mother's Day in Nicaragua, May 30, there was a Mother's Day march. This march broke all records for participation. The state police and Sandinista Youth attacked the march, killing 11 and injuring 79 all over Nicaragua.

We have not been able to discuss all the questions we would like to. Things are messy and changing constantly, and we are not the majority. Nevertheless, I will try to describe the situation.

We can see some tensions inside the movement. The most noticeable are the following:

The Private Sector vs. the *Autoconvocado* Movements

The *Autoconvocado* movement (the coalition of student organizers and community organizers, independent from the Coalition of Students and Representatives in the dialogue) has been supporting a general strike as a way to escalate the situation and put more pressure on the government to negotiate and stop the killings. The private sector (which employs dozens of thousands of people and holds a lot of wealth and political power) has not advocated for a general strike, supposedly to avoid economic losses. As a consequence, for example, the city of Masaya organized autonomously and declared, independent of the private sector, that they would conduct a

citywide general strike. That strike occurred and was violently repressed. Up to now, Masaya is the most dangerous and most affected city in Nicaragua, with over 10 people murdered by the police over last weekend.

Student Movements and the Student Coalition

There is very strong communication between the student movement and the Student Coalition that is representing the movement at the level of dialogue with the state. But many participants in the student movement feel that the Student Coalition is being very soft and diplomatic. The Coalition is a group of student organizers from multiple universities all over Nicaragua; they are the ones representing the movement in the negotiations with the state. The student organizers that form the coalition emerged from affinity groups that were created at the beginning of the student protests. I don't know exactly how they got so much power—it was a combination of being in the right place at the right time and knowing the right people. These students were the first ones to present themselves as leaders.

So the power distribution is very vague and there are instances when they have been accused of selling out. The Student Coalition representatives are the ones who release the communiqués and plans of action, and the ones who talk to the press the most. Nevertheless, it is possible for student dissidents to claim that the Coalition does not represent them and to provide a different set of demands and methods.

There are also complaints that the Student Coalition does not offer space for anyone's voices besides those of men when it comes to delegating the responsibilities.

The participant in the Student Coalition that comes closest to our perspective is probably Enrieth Martínez.

Managuacentrism

A lot of the power and decision-making process has been focused on students in Managua, since the capital has been the site of the major manifestations and occupied universities. But the cities that have been affected the most have been outside of Managua—cities that don't have a university campus, where the residents are defending themselves through citywide barricades and something like a general strike. There is no effective communication among people in the different cities, since the strategy has been to block all major roads and transportation. At the table of the dialogue with the state, there are no representatives from the cities that are affected the most. Here is where several groups have advocated for self-governance and self-administration as a way to take the decision-making power out of Managua.

Feminism

The first and most prominent critiques of the government and the state arose from feminists. Since the 1980s, feminists have critiqued the hierarchical and patriarchal aspects of the Sandinista Movement. In a famous speech by Daniel Ortega on International Women's day at the peak of the Sandinista Revolution, Ortega said that the revolutionary duty of women was to give birth to the next generation of revolutionaries. This showed how the revolution viewed women and women's

participation in everything. It has been feminists who have critiqued the state as connected to machista and religious culture in Nicaragua and Latin America. It has been feminists who have denounced hierarchies in the family, in politics, in culture, and in the state. It has also been women who have constantly said that the war against the people did not start on April 19, it started way before, but it was carried out against rural women and indigenous people in Nicaragua.

On the Question of Capitalism

People need to understand that the Nicaraguan people are sacrificing economic stability for social justice. Nicaragua was perceived as safe, an economic paradise for investment, but this only came about through the centralization of political power. Like Vietnam and China, a single-party centralized government has been an incentive to draw private investors.

Nicaragua's economic stability, which took 10 years to build, only benefitted the upper middle class and the upper class. This created a false sense of "progress," "development," and "stability," all of which the government celebrated. In reality, most of the people worked in informal sectors and did not have access to jobs. In this sense, participants in the student movement are forced to start asking questions: "OK, now I have graduated from an Autonomous University, now what? Where am I going to work? And at what price?" The vast majority of college majors and programs were "pro-market majors" focusing on business administration, engineering, computer science, marketing, tourism, and the like.

The student movements will need to address capitalism and neoliberalism and start to see how their struggle intersects with the anti-capitalist movement outside of authoritarian governments. These conversations have not started yet.

I think a lot of people are disappointed in the lack of international support towards people in Nicaragua. Americans only cared about us as long as they could come to Nicaragua to vacation and enjoy cheap things. On an international level, many of those who support the Nicaraguan insurrection are not asking hard questions about their own governments and structures. Hopefully, we can find a way to make would-be allies start addressing these questions themselves. It's true, we are seen as a "legitimate" movement that wants "democracy" (whatever that means). If we succeed, we will see how many countries will support our efforts to collectivize, autonomize, and decentralize.

Will the United States still support us after they realize our intention to go ever further left? Will a centrist government create the conditions for more radical politics to emerge? This is a long-term plan; the Ortegas will do the best they can to stay in power at whatever cost. They would prefer to stay in power in a destroyed country than give up power in a way that leaves the country stable.

I think the conversation regarding "politicians," "elections," "the state," "political participation," and "the police" are all up in the air. It's an opportunity to create new local concepts. After everything that has been lost—entire towns burned to the ground and children executed in the street—we will not settle for less. Whatever government comes next will need to radically change what it means to do politics.

I think we are trying everything from every possible angle, and it will be the people who will decide what best fits their spiritual needs. We are attacking state power from every angle, some

angles more “institutional,” “democratic,” and “legitimate” than others, but somehow these are all complementing each other.

Unfortunately, we don’t know if we are moving forwards or backwards. We just know what the government is doing everything, desperately to survive, and every single day, they lose more support. As the saying goes, *El que no critica a su gobierno, no quiere a su madre!* Those who don’t criticize their government don’t love their mothers.

Appendix: Inside an Occupied University in Managua

After a week of communicating with my contact inside the *Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Nicaragua* (UNAN), I received a message from him: “I’ll be at the main entrance in 15 minutes. I can meet you there if you want to come inside, meet everybody, and see what we’ve been up to.”

For a week, I had been participating in a support system helping the occupation at UNAN from the outside. At first, my contact, Guadalupe (a pseudonym) had advised me not come inside for fear that infiltrators might recognize me and harass me outside. But as things seemed to have settled down, I was invited in.

With about 30,000 students, UNAN is the largest public university in Nicaragua. Students have been occupying it since May 8. Every major entry is blocked by two sets of barricades, starting blocks away from the main *Portones* (entry gate). Each *porton* is guarded by at least 15 students armed with *morteros* (mortars).

“Dress up as a medical student and bring a med kit, just in case anybody is watching. They are less likely to be suspicious if you enter as a ‘medic,’” Guadalupe told me.

I crossed the main *Porton* and met Guadalupe for the first time. “Second in command” in the occupation, he is also a part of the committee representing the students in the national dialogue. He is 23 years old and a student at UNAN. Guadalupe was part of the first protest organizers inside of UNAN. Currently he divides his time between working inside and outside of UNAN, inside as a coordinator and outside as a delegate of UNAN as part of a larger student coalition.

The organization inside of UNAN involve “leaders” from different *portones* and sectors (Medical, Food, Supply) that meet up and negotiate responsibilities and priorities. These leaderships emerged out of the first week of occupation and were agreed upon by all. Since each *porton* is semi-autonomous, it can operate as a closed circuit in case of an attack, without the necessity of a top-down decision-making process that would involve the entire University. Roles were distributed by voluntary association and based around shifts so that everybody can rest. Main roles are: Guarding the barricades, sorting through donations, food, cleaning, guarding the *portones*, medical attention, communications and coalition participation.

Its important to note that the organization inside the occupied Universities occurred spontaneously. They did not follow a pre-established or pre-rehearsed organizational model. This model of organizing was the most efficient, participatory and democratic. Remember that young Nicaraguans did not have an “occupy movement” or something similar that could have provided the blueprint of how to organize. The only political models that were practiced were through hierarchical political parties, and ONG’s leadership training.

Here are the rules inside the gates: everybody in the University uses pseudonyms; you are not allowed to take any photos or videos of anything; if you are texting, you have to do it with your phone facing the ground. In Nicaragua, it is very common for people to use nicknames, usually derived from physical cues like *La Flaca* (the skinny one), *El Gordo* (the fat one), *El Negro* (the black one), *La Zorra* (the Fox), *El Chino* (the Chinese one), *El Chele* (the light-skinned one), *El Gringo* (the gringo).

Guadalupe confirmed my identity and began to show me around the university campus. Most of the *muchachos* (“the boys”—a word that includes girls) were busy taking over UNI, the Engineering University, so UNAN was somewhat quiet. Later that day, the police and Sandinista Youth attacked UNI, injuring 30 students and killing one of them.

We approach the geology building, which has been turned into a medical center. “This is one of the newest buildings of this University and we are protecting it, because we plan on using these facilities in the future for our education.” I see rooms full of medical supplies, and a lot of students sleeping in the hallways in sleeping bags. “Those are the *muchachos* from the night shift at the barricades. They sleep here during the day. Not all of them are from UNAN—some of them are neighbors that are too afraid to go back home.”

The hallways are dark and quiet, but everything is clean and organized. There are cleaning crews; students know the rules, which rooms to go into and which not to go into. “We need to protect this building. It’s the geology building. We are protecting diamonds and meteors that are worth thousands of dollars, but we want to save them for future generations to learn and study.”

The entire university is protected. You don’t see graffiti on the walls. All the classrooms are locked. The restaurants inside of the university are also protected because the occupiers don’t want the occupation to affect the small business owners who need to keep a job.

We left the building and approach one of the cooking and food collection sheds. The leader of this zone is called *Aymara*. She administrates the food in this section and keeps a tight record of all the food donations that come in. She distributes the food and supplies wherever they are needed the most.

What do you all do for food?

“We’re living off *Gallo Pinto*.” (*Gallo Pinto*—rice and beans—is the most popular Nicaraguan dish). “We don’t have a set time for breakfast. If the *muchachos* are hungry but don’t want to leave their post, we’ll send food their way. Every day, we must cook three meals for about 400 people.” The joke in Nicaragua is that we eat rice and beans for breakfast, beans with rice for lunch and *Gallo Pinto* for dinner.

Aymara also showed me a shed full of food, enough food for months, all of which has been donated by people all over Nicaragua. It is rationed out daily. Pointing to an immense pile of spoiled food, Aymara said “You see all that food? That’s all poisoned food. Sometimes people send us bananas with needles inside, or bread injected with rat poison. We need to double-check everything that we receive. That’s why we prioritize canned goods.”

“We also managed to jumpstart five university trucks and one tractor, which we use inside and outside of the university.”

This article does a good job describing the leadership of women inside and outside of the student movement. I studied with the author, Madeleine Caracas, and we both started out in the same organizing committee in early April.

Each *porton* operates semi-autonomously. Each zone has its own medical center, food center, and bomb-making center, each with a delegate in every *porton*. Every *porton* is always ready to

defend itself. Two nights before my visit, an armed man on a motorcycle rapidly approached a barricade, shooting at the students. The students defended themselves with mortars and injured the motorcyclist, who destroyed his phone before the students moved him to a local hospital. He died on the way there.

This was a very confusing scenario. The man on the motorcycle underestimated the abilities of the students to defend themselves. Why would he attack the barricades by himself? Did he plan on shooting, perhaps killing, some students and then retreating? We don't know.

Such attacks usually happen at night. Keep in mind that this university is the size of an entire neighborhood, with hundreds of buildings, classrooms, departments and soccer and basketball courts, with six different entryways. In order to add more protection at night, the barricades are moved further out of the university perimeter to create more of a buffer zone.

Unlike UPOLI, UNAN does not have the support of the local community to protect them. In this sense, the students are more exposed. UNAN is neighbored by *La Colonia Miguel Bonilla*, which is an Orteguista neighborhood. This community was created in the 1980s during the Sandinista Revolution, and most of the houses are owned by the police, the military, and high-ranking military officials. This neighborhood was one of the military headquarters during the Somoza dictatorship, but was confiscated during the revolution and given to UNAN students for housing and to military, police, and civilians to live in. Therefore, most of the families that live inside of *La Miguel Bonilla* strongly support the Orteguista government as a "revolutionary government." If you are a political dissident in *La Miguel Bonilla*, you must keep a low profile; there have been many cases of harassment by the community towards anti-Ortega supporters. *La Miguel Bonilla* is also where a lot of UNAN administration officials live, the safe officials that perpetuate and institutionalize the Orteguista influence inside of the University.

The UNAN has a strong barricade in front of the entrance to *La Miguel Bonilla*, since a majority of the attacks have been organized inside of the neighborhood, which functions as a safe space for Orteguista forces.

What do you want to accomplish?

"We want to obtain university autonomy, a complete restructuring of UNEN [the chief Nicaraguan student union], and a complete restructuring of the internal administration of the University. Every day we spend in this university, we are sending a message to all of Nicaragua about how far we are willing to go to offer quality education for our generation and future generations."

What does autonomy mean to you?

"It means professors not getting fired because they oppose decisions that the government has been making. It means giving access to scholarships to everybody, not just the Sandinista Youth. It means taking the Orteguista party out of the University's administration. It means studying things that matter. We need a student-centered education and not an Orteguista-centered education, and this is happening not just at the University level but also at the Primary and Secondary school education level."

I noted Campus Security was still present in the University. I asked about their role in the university during the occupation. Guadalupe told me, "They work here because they are privately hired, so they don't want to lose their jobs. They have helped us identify infiltrators and have been an extra set of eyes and ears in their own communities, to help the students. They're on our side."

For context, in Nicaragua, Campus Security is nothing like the police or "private security." They do not carry weapons; they do not have the power to turn people in to the police. This job was

created in the 1990s when so many revolutionaries were jobless. These jobs are done at a very low wage by very poor families, usually protecting empty lots.

What message do you have for students around the world?

“Hopefully we can inspire students to occupy their universities and start building the kind of university they want to study in.

“It’s also super important for Universities to have a good relationship with their neighborhood. That way you can involve the community in matters that affect the university and start building solidarity.”

The students I met and spoke with in UNAN seem to have developed an unbreakable bond based on solidarity that crosses gender and class backgrounds. They appear willing to die for each other and to protect the future they believe in. They have spent over three weeks building barricades, conspiring, living together, and protecting each other, forever changing what it means to be a student in Nicaragua.

What comes next? Will other forces intervene in Nicaragua to maintain and intensify neoliberalism? Or will the rebellion expand its scope and analysis to take on the forces beyond the Ortega regime?

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